

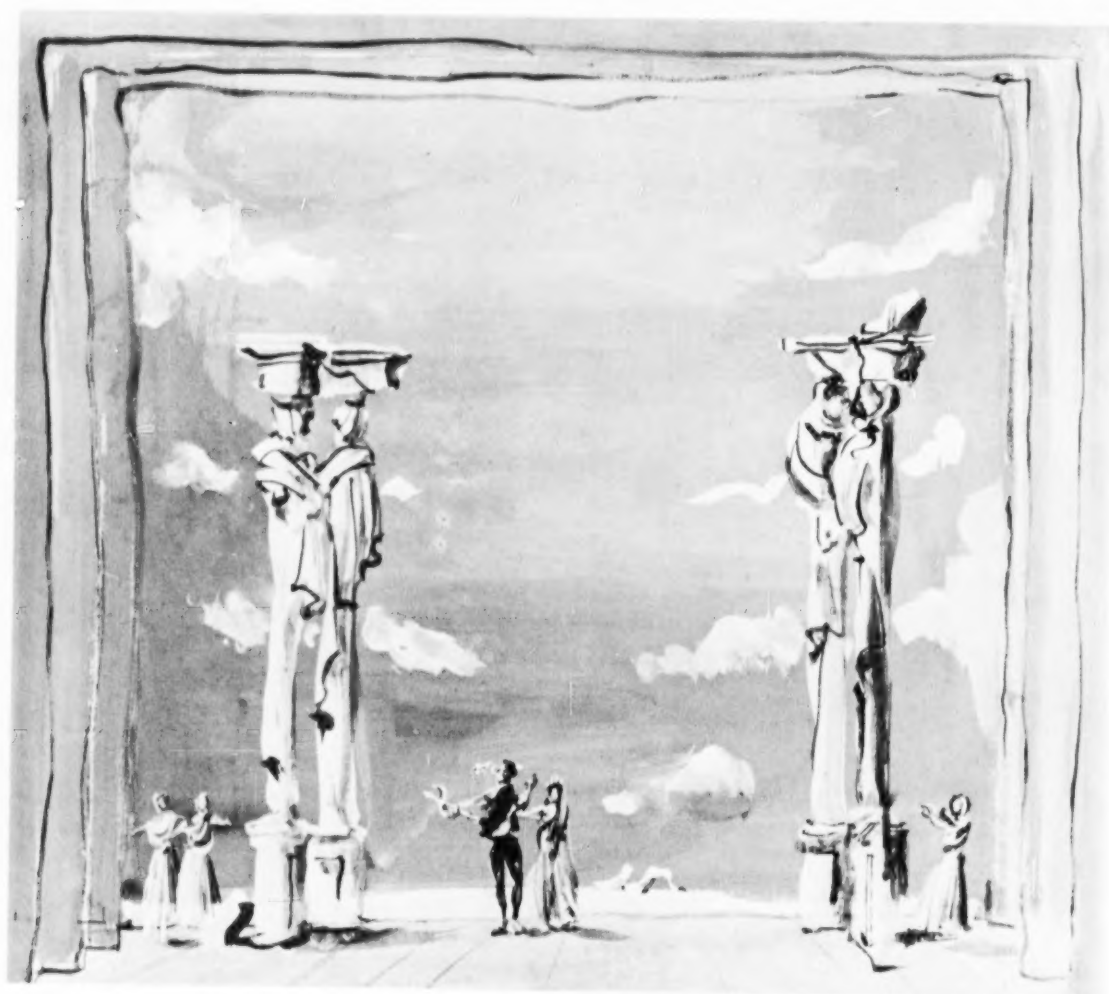


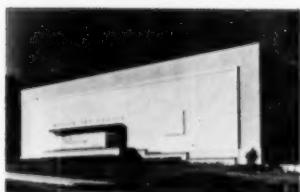
EVERYDAY ART QUARTERLY

WALKER ART CENTER, MINNEAPOLIS

NUMBER 26, 1953

The Seventh Symphony, setting for Act II, Monte Carlo, 1938. Christian Berard. Collection Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo





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EVERYDAY ART QUARTERLY

ISSUE NUMBER 26, 1953

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20th Century Ballet Design

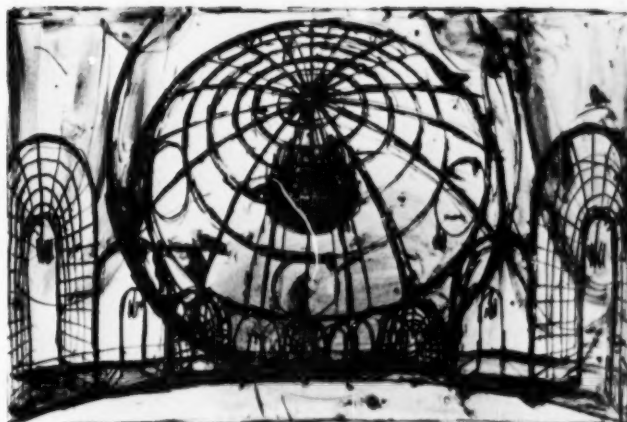
For more than three centuries theatrical design has provoked a curiously ambiguous esthetic reaction, wavering between admiration for its undeniable artistic distinction and sneaking doubts about its artistic legitimacy. The reason for this uncertainty is the awareness that stage design, judged out of theatrical context, loses its essential justification; it then becomes something else for which there is no ready definition or frame of reference. Summarily, scenic designs may be defined as authentic documents of artistic intention in a state of yet unachieved purpose. The execution on paper or canvas, regardless of its possible excellence, is but one phase in a comprehensive creative process, a transitional recording of the artist's vision before it becomes involved in the mechanics of the stage production. Although both project and realization may hold identical qualities of magic and fascination, this physical condition becomes the ultimate test for the artist's achievement. For if the painter's two-dimensional rendition be considered as absolutely self-sufficient and definitive, it does not permit of any further form of elaboration, transformation or reinterpretation in whatever other artistic medium. Its very state of finality and perfection would condemn its use for the stage.

The esthetic issue has become confused. Evidently a drawing or painting by Picasso, Braque, Rouault, arouses interest regardless of its scenic relevance or merit, whereas the fair appreciation of the work of a Bakst, Roerich or Benois depends largely on the understanding or the premise of a specific theatrical concept. In America, more than in Europe, the professional stage designer and the easel painter tend to move in separate artistic realms and toward different artistic ends—although here they have to pass the same union examination in order to qualify for a contract. Whatever useful purposes this rigid test may serve, it does neither warrant nor further esthetic standards, as ex-

perience has shown. There are always those, of course, who would gladly sacrifice the spirit of the theatre to the genius of painting—as though they were mutually exclusive. This absurd alternative characterizes the predominantly realistic theatre of our time which offers little opportunity and no challenge for visual imagination. In the majority of today's productions, on as well as off Broadway, the pride of the designer seems to be successfully to disguise the illusion, rather than to create it. Our dramatic theatre is the poorer for being so literal, and this explains why the ballet, unrealistic by definition and purpose, has become the favorite place of refuge for scenic creativeness in the great tradition.

The ballet stage has maintained a privileged and respected artistic position mainly for the reason that so many painters of fame and stature contributed their talents to its scenic investiture. The beginning—or more accurately: the revival—of this specific esthetic attitude with regard to stage design can be precisely placed and dated. One man was responsible for it, Serge de Diaghilev. Early in our century, the great Russian impresario arrived in Paris with a ballet company which has since acquired an almost legendary reputation, the *Ballets Russes de Monte Carlo*. Originally it was a visiting ensemble composed exclusively of Russian artists and performers, successful beyond precedent in the very same connoisseur circles which patronized the promising young painters of the day. In this earlier period originated such splendid realizations as Léon Bakst's *Scheherazade* (1910), Nicholas Roerich's *Sacre du Printemps* (1913), Alexandre Benois' *Petrouchka* (1911), and Natalie Gontcharova's *Coq d'Or* (1914). European ballet became identified with Russian ballet. Eventually Diaghilev settled in France, and in later years, particularly after the First World War, he developed the international company and promoted the

Concerto, sketch for Act III, 1942.
Pavel Tchelitchew. Museum of Modern Art



cosmopolitan style which we associate with his venture today. Russian ballet had become international ballet. To those circumstances we owe many of the finest theatrical designs of all times; a greatly increased interest in this special facet of the visual arts; and a precedent of concept and practice that was to be followed by every major ballet organization since the disbanding of the original Diaghilev company in the late twenties.

Resuming the great tradition of the theatrical spectacles of the Renaissance and the Baroque, Diaghilev and his artistic collaborators insisted on the essential unity of concept, including all the contributive elements that make up the specific art of the ballet: music, choreography, dancing, décor, and costumes. The artist participating in this complex production was dimly aware that he was sacrificing something of his sovereign rights and prerogatives, that his own part in the whole owed its artistic existence and validity to the perfection of the total conception. There was little of the extreme specialization or compartmentalization which later prevailed in the professional theatre, and so often destroyed the unity of vision and the integrity of the realization. The ballet theatre became an immensely provocative new challenge for the artist. Although he found himself limited in his creative freedom, he also discovered an expansion of his medium into unsuspected new dimensions. No longer determined the rigid picture frame and the flat canvas the physical limitations of his imaginative realizations; he learned to think in terms of actual space and volume, of continual changes of colors and light intensities within the same composition, of figures in the round populating this stage world, actually moving and thus creating surprisingly new tensions and relationships in a three-dimensional microcosm. The ordinary easel painter was not always fully master of this comprehensive and complex

medium, and not all the designs created in this new spirit were equally successful. However, Diaghilev's extraordinary skill and sensitivity were almost always able to invent the task to fit the artist, rather than to compel the artist to make compromises and adjustments contrary to his personality and style.

The ballet theatre is not an art museum. The fact that Diaghilev's legacy of beautiful ballet designs is sufficiently important to warrant appreciation and preservation for its own artistic sake and to enter our art museums and collections, has caused some esthetic misconceptions which need clarification. In a general way, many of the most valued treasures of modern ballet design have been created as well as appreciated on questionable premises, owing their particular charm to the artist's flagrant unconcern with practical function and problems of execution. As a category ballet design still lives largely on borrowed fame, rather than on its own theatrical resources. For the stature of its foremost representatives imposes artistic standards and principles which are frequently alien to the stage. The appreciation of Marc Chagall's exquisite settings and costumes for *Aleko* (1942) and *Firebird* (1945) is mixed with doubts and reservations concerning the theatrical realization. They are a painter's triumph; but there is neither much opportunity nor much need for the ballet's central interest: the dance. Picasso's powerful, yet small-scale painting, *The Race*, once had been arbitrarily enlarged to giant proportions to serve as a front curtain for *Train Bleu* (1924), where it made a striking impression, but no sense whatsoever. Masson's lively inventions for *Les Présages* (1933) reveal a blissful unconcern with scenic functions and requirements. Miro's curtain for *Roméo et Juliette* (1926), an exquisite painting in its own right, has no more relevance to the production than the ballet proper has to Shakespeare. Similar examples of theatrical miscon-

ceptions abound, although the pleasure derived from the dramatic display of fine paintings on the stage is quite genuine and often greeted with applause for the mere spectacular sight. Indeed, some people are inclined to argue whether in this perspective the question of theatrical validity does not become irrelevant or secondary. It is a crucial problem, however, for the choreographer and the performer, lest the dubious conception of art for art's sake and the nostalgic memory of Diaghilev's now legendary productions revive artificially a ballet theatre without the essential substance of the performance.

As a matter of historical record, Diaghilev himself had been largely responsible for this sharpening conflict. His success hid the ominous fact that he was perpetuating an increasingly empty formula. His ballet had absorbed and used everything new and exciting cosmopolitan art in Paris had to offer. The finest composers and the greatest painters had jointly carried his ultimate, refined predilection for musical and decorative sophistication to the extreme. For theatrical dancing it was a time of latent crisis; for ballet design it was decidedly a most profitable development. It is impossible to list here even the names of all the distinguished artists who have been connected with the ballet; hardly any one of the best known representatives of modern painting between the two World Wars is missing; to quote at random: Braque, Rouault, Matisse, Léger, Laurencin, Derain, Max Ernst, de Chirico, Bonnard, Dufy, Gris, Bérard, Picasso, Bauchant, Utrillo, and many others. For the most part those artists created with an unrestrained disregard for stage mechanics and dance requirements never yet tolerated or practiced in the modern theatre. They established the supremacy of scenic easel painting as an uncontested principle before anybody became aware of its basic fallacy and its potential danger. Thus the ballet after Diaghilev was faced with the difficult task of rectifying the situation and reestablishing a reasonable balance between the art of the theatre and the art of painting. It is not surprising, on the other hand, to discover that some of those painters were keenly aware of genuine theatrical potentialities and adapted themselves to the medium with admirable ease and versatility. Picasso, for instance, designed several fine productions, two outrageously experimental ones: *Mercure* (1924) and *Parade* (1917); two eminently theatrical ones: the cunning cubist setting for *Pulcinella* (1920) and the charming décor for *Cuadro Flamenco* (1921), with the witty theatre boxes which a lucky chance pre-

served whole; and he created an unsurpassed masterpiece, the beautiful setting and the magnificent costumes for *Le Tricorne* (1919).

With a sharp perception of stage function in terms of light, space and movement, the brothers Gabo and Pevsner devised a strikingly effective constructivist setting for *La Chatte* (1927). Christian Bérard, however, was the only artist in this exceptional group who devoted himself to scenic design as a chosen calling and approached it in a truly professional way. Aside from many fine projects for the dramatic theatre, he created half a dozen beautiful ballets of which *Symphonie Fantastique* (1936), with its poetic symbolism; the color variations of the three sets for *Seventh Symphony* (1938); and the clean simplicity of *Cotillon* (1932) were possibly the most successful in creating space illusion and theatre magic. Of the painter-designers entering the field more recently, Pavel Tchelitchew, Eugene Berman, and Salvador Dali in America; Leslie Hurry, Roger Furse, and Michael Ayrton in England; José Clemente Orozco and Julio de Diego in Mexico; and some fifteen or twenty talents in France, where the schism between easel and stage has never become so acute, stand out as the most consistently theatrical artists. In scope and artistic significance, Berman's work occupies a very special position. At the present moment he is probably the greatest single figure in the world of theatrical design. A craftsman par excellence, a thoroughly versed student of theatre history, a painter of vision and surrealist magic, he has invariably succeeded in conveying to his creations both personal distinction and scenic power. Among his most notable accomplishments may be mentioned the noble architecture and the sumptuous costumes for *Romeo and Juliet* (1942), the jewel-like brilliance of *Danses Concertantes* (1944), and the disciplined grandeur and style of *Concerto Barocco* (1941). If ever the Diaghilev formula proved its value and its basic soundness, it was demonstrated in the New York presentation of *Orpheus* (1948) in which Stravinsky's transcendental score, Balanchine's tectonic-fluid choreography, the dancers' incisive and sensitive performing style, and the mobile space-light décor of the sculptor Isamu Noguchi, were congenially fused into the most memorable ballet production in this writer's experience. Productions of such perfect style and pervasive beauty silence all doubts and reservations, and there is good reason to be hopeful for the future of ballet design.

George Amberg



The Firebird, costumes for monsters. New York 1945. Marc Chagall. Owned by the artist

PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY OF MUSEUM OF MODERN ART



The Cave of Sleep, costume. Project 1941. Pavel Tchelitchev. Museum of Modern Art





*Le Tricorne, three costumes. London 1919.
Pablo Picasso. Museum of Modern Art*

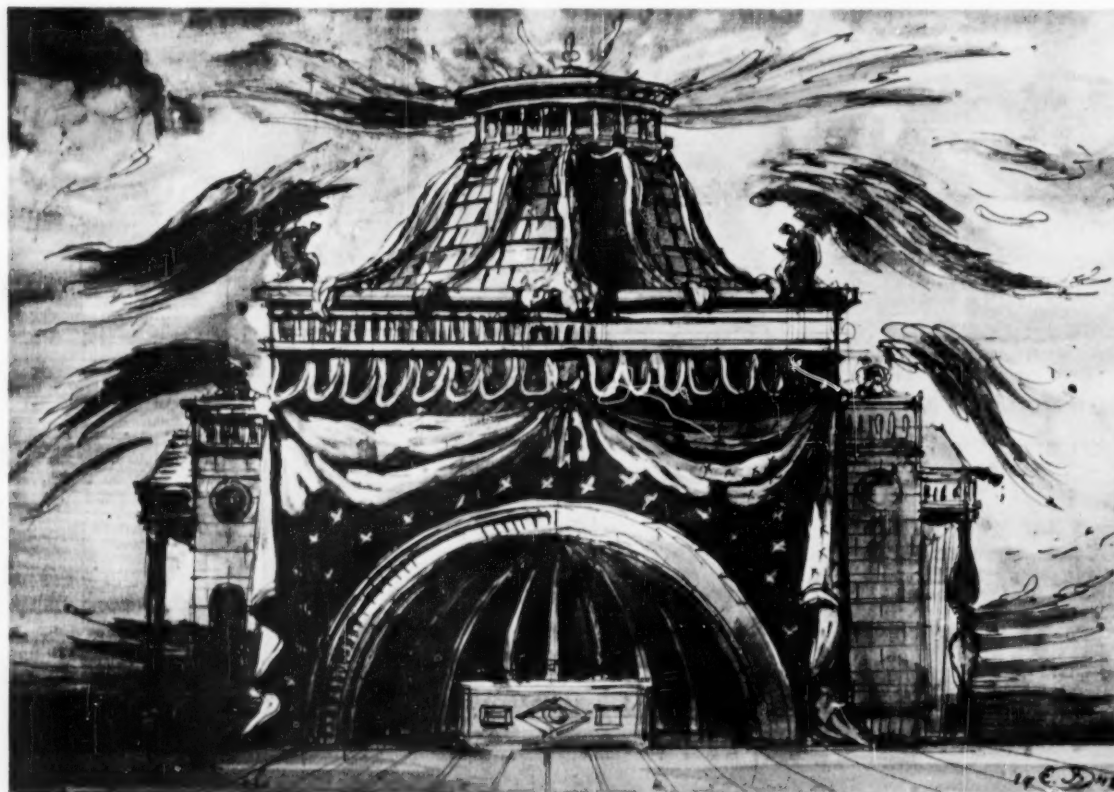
Romeo and Juliet, two costume drawings. New York 1942. Eugene Berman. Museum of Modern Art





Undertow, drawing for backdrop. New York 1945. Raymond Breinin. Downtown Gallery, New York

Romeo and Juliet, design for tomb scene. Eugene Berman. New York 1942. Museum of Modern Art



*Le Tricorne, sketch for setting. London 1919.
Pablo Picasso. Wadsworth Atheneum*



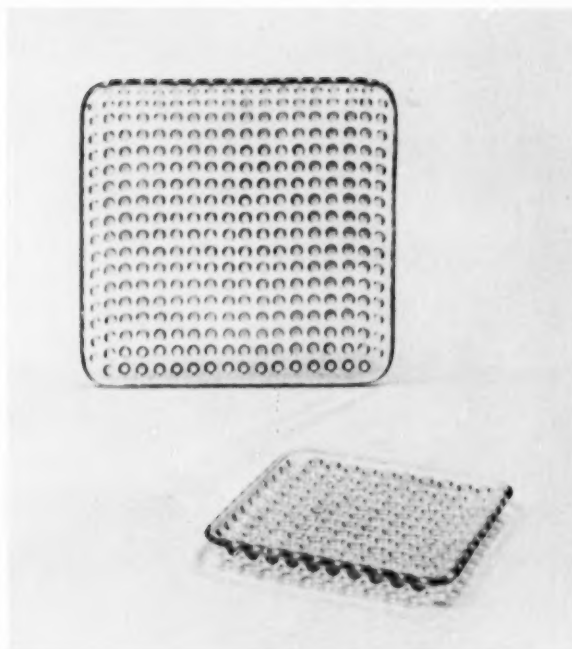
*The Race, painting for front curtain. Train Bleu. Paris 1924.
Pablo Picasso. Museum of Modern Art*

*Le Fils Prodigue, backdrop for Scene I. Paris 1929.
Georges Rouault. Wadsworth Atheneum*



Product Review

ITEM: Dessert plate, bread and butter plate
DESCRIPTION: Contemporary hobnail opalescent glass
MANUFACTURER: The Fenton Glass Company
PRICE: \$1.40, .80



ITEM: Casserole
DESCRIPTION: Five quart, stoneware
MANUFACTURER: Edith Heath
PRICE: \$20.10

ITEM: Table lamp
DESCRIPTION: On stand of tubular steel, base cast iron, shade spun aluminum. Designed by Olga Lee
MANUFACTURER: Ralph O. Smith, California
PRICE: Approximately \$29.50





ITEM: Salad set
DESCRIPTION: Flintwood—7 pieces durable wood fibre and plastic
MANUFACTURER: N. S. Gustin Company, Los Angeles, California
PRICE: \$7.95

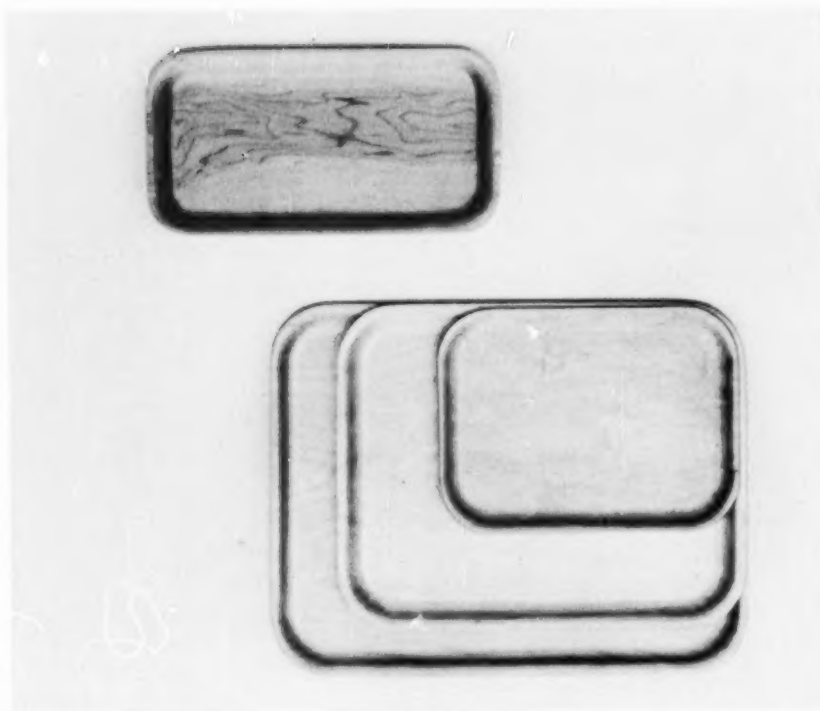


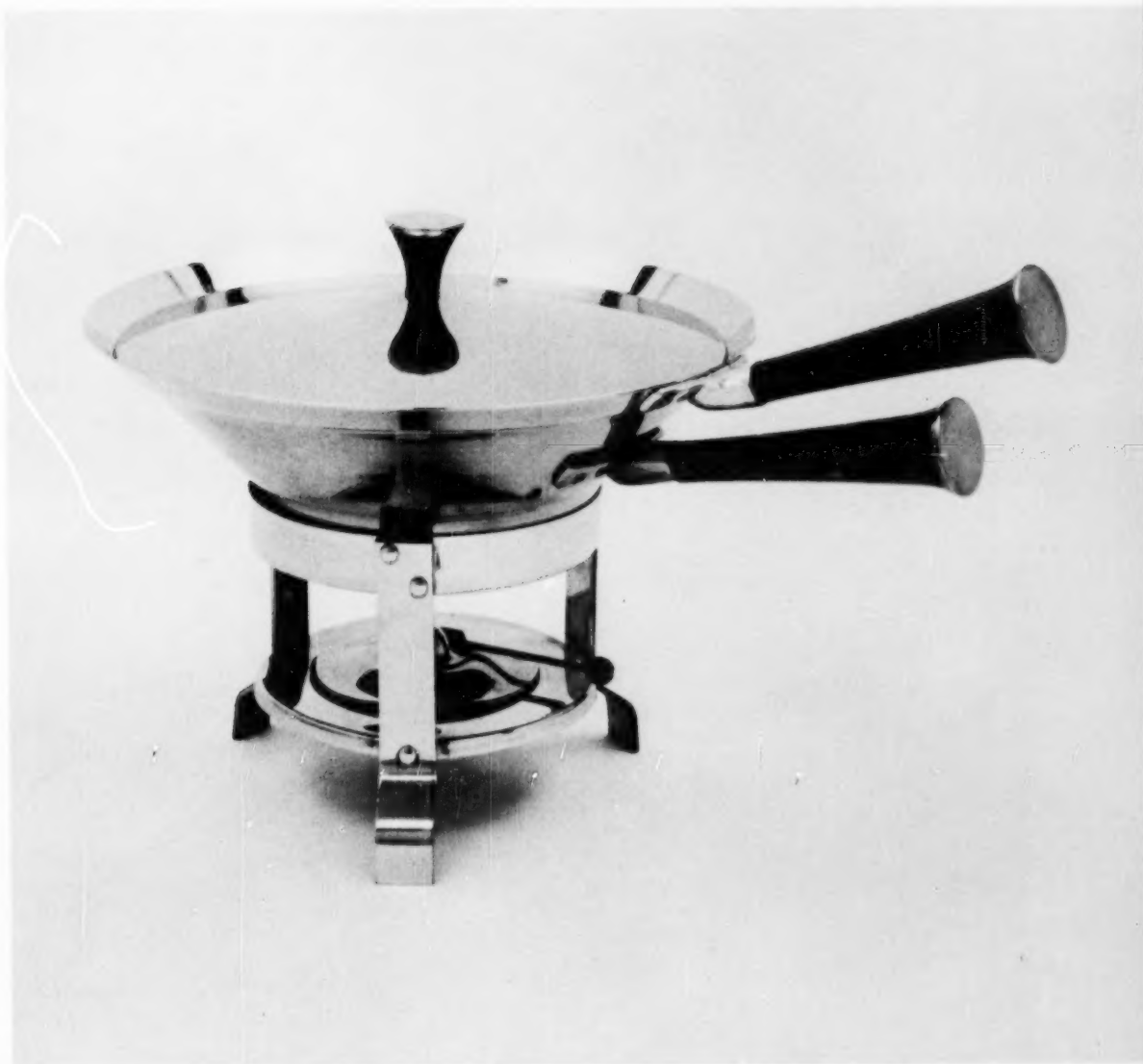
ITEM: Arm chair
 DESCRIPTION: Robin Day designed, strong, comfortable, steel rod frame
 MANUFACTURER: John Stuart Inc. New York
 PRICE: \$125.00

ITEM: Arm chair
 DESCRIPTION: Woven cane and bent wood
 MANUFACTURER: Knoll Associates Inc. New York
 PRICE: \$36.00



ITEM: Serving trays
DESCRIPTION: Moulded plywood, alcohol resistant lacquer
MANUFACTURER: Woodcroftery Shops, Wayland, New York
PRICE: \$4.00, \$3.00, \$2.25, \$1.75





ITEM: Chafing dish
DESCRIPTION: Brass and copper, wood handles
MANUFACTURER: Rubel & Company, New York
PRICE: \$19.95

ITEM: Arm chair
DESCRIPTION: Laminated wood with maple face veneers
MANUFACTURER: Thonet Industries Inc. New York
PRICE: \$33.50



ITEM: Water pitcher
DESCRIPTION: Clear glass, 2½ quart. Designed by Sussumuth
MANUFACTURER: Frederick Lunning Inc. New York
PRICE: \$8.50





ITEM: Child's toy

DESCRIPTION: "The House of Cards", Charles Eames designed, consists of fifty-four plastic-coated, slotted cards

MANUFACTURER: Tigrett Enterprises, Chicago, Illinois

PRICE: \$1.00 per pack



ITEM: Upholstered chair

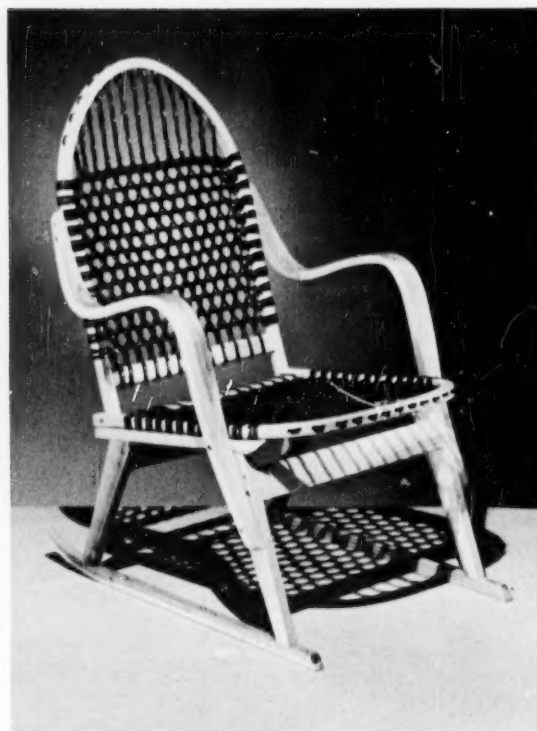
DESCRIPTION: Laminated bentwood, upholstered with foam rubber

MANUFACTURER: Thonet Industries Inc. New York

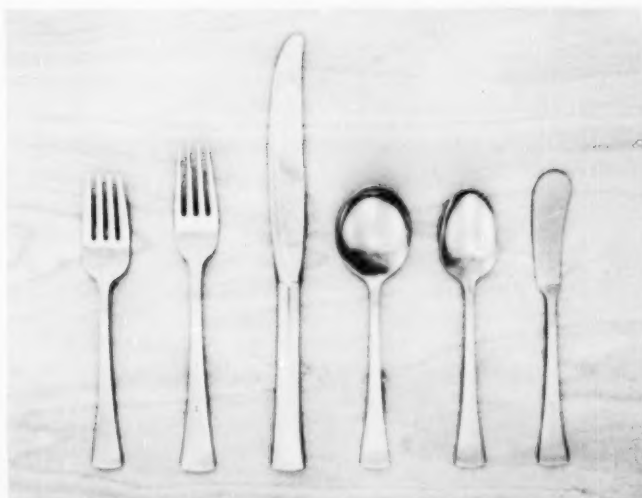
PRICE: \$35.00



ITEM: Snow shoe "Vermont Ash" arm chair
 DESCRIPTION: Made of selected grain White Ash. Seats and backs woven of natural translucent rawhide
 MANUFACTURER: Vermont Tubbs, Inc. Wallingford, Vermont
 PRICE: Seat 15" high, \$34.50. Seat 18" high, \$37.50



ITEM: Snow shoe arm chair
 DESCRIPTION: Frames hand made of steam bent white ash. Exposed hardware brass and copper. Clear spar varnish finish. Seat and back laced of natural, translucent rawhide
 MANUFACTURER: Vermont Tubbs Inc. Wallingford, Vermont
 PRICE: \$37.50



ITEM: Place setting

DESCRIPTION: Stainless steel 6-piece, hollow handle, satin finish, one of the best designs available

MANUFACTURER: Wallace & Sons, Wallingford, Connecticut

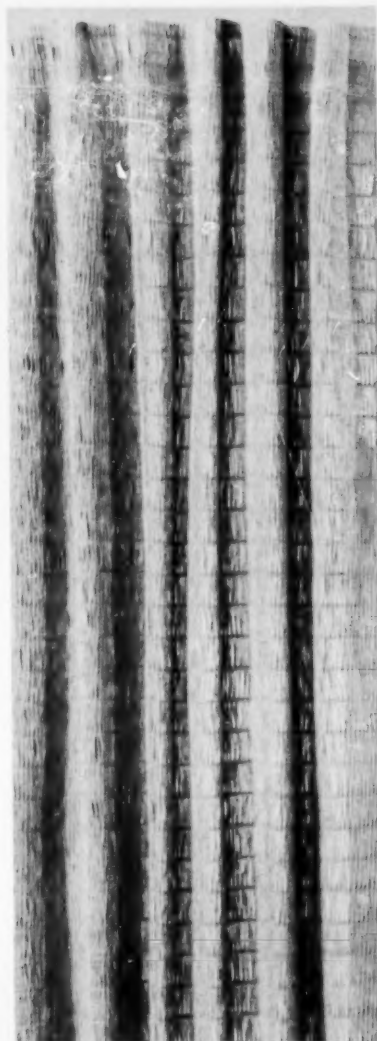
PRICE: \$6.50

ITEM: Draperies

DESCRIPTION: Twisted fibres treated with plastic and woven together with cotton threads. Available in Natural, Ginger brown, Willow green, Dove gray and Chinese red

MANUFACTURER: The Columbia Mills Inc. New York

PRICE: \$6.00 to \$12.00 a pair



BOOK REVIEWS

ROOTS OF CONTEMPORARY AMERICAN ARCHITECTURE, Lewis Mumford, editor. 454 pages. Reinhold Publishing Company, 1952. \$7.00

In this volume Lewis Mumford brings together thirty-seven selections from twenty-nine authors who, between 1844 and 1950, have written on varying aspects of the problems involved in the creation of a living architecture. Although the original publication dates of the essays and excerpts are spread over more than a hundred years, only fourteen belong to the nineteenth century and of these only six were written before 1890.

Four of the chapters, in addition to the excellent introductory section, are by Mr. Mumford. He sees the "new tradition" as resting on a fivefold foundation—domestic, regional, mechanical, social and universal—with "the decisive point of departure . . . a break with the conception of an architectural absolute, an archetypal perfection established for all time by the Greeks and Romans—", an error taken over by the anti-classicists who sought to give some phase of Medieval development ". . . the same stereotyped authority that Palladianism had claimed for the classic."

The reader not already familiar with the materials here brought together will be pleasantly surprised by the quality of these thoughts from a period that, quantitatively, produced so little good building. He will be interested to note that many of the attitudes and feelings expressed by Frank Lloyd Wright in 1941 have their parallel in those of Andrew Jackson Downing in 1844, and to find that the older essays, as those by Greenough (1853), Thoreau (1854), Vaux (1857) and Jarves (1864) are as pertinent to architecture today as they were when first published. It is good to have the ten essays in the sections called "Social Responsibilities," and the "Search for the Universal," brought together in one volume. Chief among the book's several virtues is the rescue of some twenty of the essays from periodicals and books that are not widely known or easily available. All the selections deserve a wider and more popular readership than they currently enjoy and each, in the realm of ideas, is very much alive today. It should be noted, however, that these are not all of the roots, as the title would imply, or even most of the roots of contemporary American architecture.

In his introductory essay Mr. Mumford does emphasize that "though the United States was a focal point for the invention of modern forms and for the new tradition . . . (the new tradition is) part of a larger movement and . . . a similar tale could be told, with appropriate modifications, for other countries within the same orbit of civilization." In spite of this explicit statement, and despite the fact that a host of influential European names appear re-

peatedly in the essays, both the form of the book and the content of the selections tend to overemphasize ideas that are or appear to be native, and to obscure the fact that American architecture is the product of an American-European community of thought. The importance of Gropius, Le Corbusier, and Mies van der Rohe are recognized in the excerpt from Hitchcock-Johnson, *The International Style*, but the extent of their influence—whether for good or bad—on present-day practice in the United States is not truly indicated. Both Gropius and Le Corbusier have written extensively; nowhere in the book do they present their own thoughts. It is natural that the selections should reflect Mr. Mumford's bias in favor of a tradition that would hope to reunite man and architecture in nature, but the reader should recognize that such a "tradition," however desirable, is more alive in the area of dreams and ideals than in that of current architectural practice. To gain a more fully rounded view of those wider sources that have shaped current thinking and practice, the reader should supplement this excellent volume with Walter Curt Behrendt, *Modern Building* and Nikolaus Pevsner, *Pioneers of Modern Design*.

The book contains biographical sketches of the authors but is not illustrated. Seven dollars is a high price for a volume that contains so much material that lies in the public domain.
Donald R. Torbert

THE ITALIAN PAINTERS OF THE RENAISSANCE, by Bernard Berenson, 488 pages. Phaidon Publishers Inc. 1952. \$7.50

Among the various artistic and intellectual activities of the Renaissance the art of painting has been of pre-eminent interest to Americans. This book by Bernard Berenson on the Italian painters of the Renaissance will certainly fortify our esteem for the art of that era and for the artists who broke through confining arid medievalism to open the way for contemporary freedom in creative expression. The fact that most of the writing was done fifty years ago, when the author was a less-seasoned authority than he is now, does not detract from a work that imparts a quality of movement and realism to an historical epoch that is usually over-romanticized and statically conceived. We learn that it was passion for glory rather than love of beauty that mobilized patronage of the arts; and that city states, merchant princes, schools and churches all sought a share in that glory. But favorable acceptance of an artist's work alone—as witness Milan—did not produce great art. Genius, defined by Berenson as "the capacity for productive reaction against one's training," is indispensable to any great art. And to

be art a work must be "life-enhancing," possessing "ideated sensations of contact, of texture, of weight, of support, of energy, and of union with one's surroundings." Yet even the genius is limited by the state of artistic development that he encounters in his day. Thus the diminished power of reaction displayed by the Mannerists, Eclectics, Realists, and Tenebrists, was due to their energy being misdirected and ill-spent in an inauspicious artistic milieu.

How poignantly acute his remarks about the individual artist or painting! Here is Titian's "Charles V On Horseback"—a tired, sad, inert, debilitated Charles on his plumed shining black horse—this is "man suffering from the reactions to his environment." And of Perugino—"he painted profoundly religious subjects, but was himself an atheist and villain."

By means of four hundred reproductions (an amazing number of the originals are in the United States) every textual comment is illustrated and each reproduction has a succinct interpretative observation. Much in this volume that deals with "materialism in art," "prettiness," "impersonal art," is contemporaneously germane. His art theory, however, with emphasis on "tactile values" and autonomic nervous system reactions is a rather unrewarding early twentieth century physiological aesthetic.

The book leaves one with a comprehensive appreciation of Renaissance painting. The more serious student might wish for dates, but this would not be granted by the author who prefers that the picture be enjoyed without reference to collateral data. The reproductions are well printed, but why punish the diligent by compelling him to execute about two thousand page turns! To the opulent, my advice is to get two books; to ordinary mortals I advise dividing the book in two with a sharp knife and keeping out of sight of bibliophiles.

M. S.

PAUL KLEE, by Carola Giedion-Welcker, 156 pages. The Viking Press, New York, 1952. \$7.50

For an artist of the stature of Paul Klee, the entrancing and hypnotic nature of whose works has led already to the formation of Klee cults, there has appeared astonishingly little serious literature in English. Carola Giedion-Welcker's important monograph is in fact the first study to be translated into English that attempts any sort of comprehensive treatment. Essays and articles by Alfred Barr, James J. Sweeney, James Soby and others have contributed to our knowledge, but until the appearance of the present work only the barest outlines of Klee's development and contribution had been made available to the English and American public. The appearance of this

book is then an exciting event to all those who have been both intrigued and baffled in their attempts to penetrate the mysteries of Klee.

Paul Klee is an artist who, despite his devoted following, has been consistently underrated. Perhaps because he deprecated his own talents, perhaps because he worked consistently on a small scale, there has been in both Europe and this country a tendency to think of him as a charming "minor master." He has also suffered from the fact that he is an artist almost impossible to classify, to place firmly in a niche, to relate confidently to this or that artistic movement. It is unfortunately the pattern of art history that such artists tend to be conveniently forgotten, particularly as the historical categories harden and congeal. Klee used elements of cubism, futurism, expressionism, surrealism, but cannot be placed in any of these categories. And yet the last thing he could be considered is an eclectic. In fact the reason he had no important followers, he created no immediate tradition, is that his art is almost impossible to imitate or even adapt.

Curiously enough, despite this seeming isolation from what are considered the main streams of contemporary art, the artist has suffered in the popular imagination from having been used too often and too glibly as an illustration of this or that attribute of modern art. Klee "illustrates" the contemporary artist seeking the naive vision of the child, the unencumbered directness of the primitive, the color and pattern of the orient. Some approaches to him (and unfortunately Dr. Giedion-Welcker's book has some of this) would seem to suggest that a catalogue of the parts would result in a clear picture of the whole. Certainly he has been affected by children's art, by primitive art, by Chinese painting and Egyptian calligraphy. But when we have said all this we are little nearer to the mystery of his mind and of his art. Everything he took was completely transformed by one of the most sensitive spirits, one of the most subtle intelligences, and one of the most brilliant techniques in all modern art.

One senses in Dr. Giedion-Welcker's thorough, careful, and soundly documented study something of the frustration we all must feel in attempting to translate into words a talent so rich, varied, and elusive. That she cannot be said to have succeeded entirely is no fault of hers. Her book remains a landmark of great significance for the reevaluation of Klee's personality and art. And that this reevaluation is in process is evident in the increasing interest of younger artists in both Europe and America. At this mid-century point when the entire process of artistic creation is being reexamined, when the relation between the rational and intuitive elements is being so violently discussed, it may be that Paul Klee's stature as a prophet is at last being realized.

H. H. Arnason

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